DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 803 CS 502 504

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TITLE "Fighting Words": Black and White.
PUB DATE May 79
NOTE 75p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 1-5, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; Black Attitudes; *Black Culture; Caucasians; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Problems; *Cultural Differences; Interaction; Interaction Process Analysis; *Language Styles; Language Usage; Legal Problems; *Race Relations; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

After describing scenes that reveal a pattern in which whites regard blacks' speech behavior as threatening, aggressive, or hostile, and in which blacks disagree with their interpretation, this paper explores differences between black and white cultural assumptions, values, and conventions of aggressive behavior to account for the different interpretations. The following topics are discussed: general cultural assumptions about assertive/expressive behavior, including cultural assumptions about self-control; differences in what appear to be similar conventions of language use regarding arguments and discussions, arguments and fights, threats, woofing, cultural ritual as drama, woofing as drama, and woofing as play; the conceptual beginning of a fight for blacks; and implications of different black and white cultural perspectives on aggressive behavior for black/white interaction, social intervention, and legal interpretation. Numerous black/white dialogues are presented to clarify the topics discussed. (GT)

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"'FIGHTING WORDS'

Black and White"

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FIGHTING WORDS

Introduction

Scene One

In a CBS television program entitled "Justice in America—Some Are More Equal Than Others," aired on April 20, 1971, six black and five white members of a jury, that as a whole consisted of seven blacks and five whites, agreed to discuss their reactions to a trial of a member of the Black Panther party who had been charged with "illegal possession of firearms" and "conspiracy". From a legal standpoint, the basis for the "possessions" charge—which was sustained—was clear-cut, involving little more on the part of jury members than the need to confirm that the accused indeed had firearms in his car when he was stopped by police. The "conspiracy" charge, however, was more complicated. It originated with the state prosecution's contention that Panther party statements like "off the pig", which were part of the literature that was also found in the Panther member's car, should be interpreted literally: as constituting a declaration of intent of individual Panther party members, as well as a directive to

other black people, to "kill policemen". During the interview, a white juror acknowledged that he and the other white jurors initially interpreted such statements as threats. The black jurors, however, interpreted them as rhetoric. As a consequence, the "conspiracy" charge against the Black Panther party member was not sustained.

Scene Two

At issue in a meeting between community residents and university faculty at my campus some years ago was the assimilationist ("remedial") philosophy embodied in the College of Education's proposal for a Master of Arts degree in Urban Education. The disagreement and opposition of those community residents and faculty opposing the degree proposal was vigorous and heated. This led one white female faculty member to characterize the session as a "Baptist Revival meeting". In response to this, a black male faculty member pointed a finger at her and said angrily, "You can't make me over into your image." Upon seeing the worried and anxious look on her face that his remark produced, he said, "You don't need to worry: I'm still talking. When I stop talking, then you might have to worry." She was hardly reassured. After

the session was over, the white female faculty member accused the black male faculty member of having "threatened" her. The black male faculty member said, "All I did was talk to her. Now how can that be threatening?"

Scene Three

A white female faculty member had just begun to teach black high school students as part of the Louisville desegregation plan. Two black male students assumed a menacing confrontational posture toward each other in dispute over who held claim to a particular seat. Though no punches were actually thrown, the teacher nevertheless sent the two students down to the principal's office for "fighting". At the end of the class period, several black students came up to the teacher and said, "Why did you send the two students down to the principal's office for fighting? They weren't going to do anything." Yet, so certain was the teacher that blows were about to be exchanged, that in her own mind, by her own account, "fighting" had already begun.

Scene Four

During President Woodrow Wilson's term of office, he granted an audience to the black emissary Monroe Trotter. During their conversation Wilson complained to Trotter about his speech behavior, as follows (Duberman, 1964:54):

Wilson: Your manner offends me.

Trotter: In what way?

Wilson: Your tone, with its background of passion.

Trotter: But I have no passion within me, Mr. President. You are entirely mistaken. You misinterpret my earnestness for passion (emphasis added).

Each of the above scenes is representative of a black/white encounter in which blacks exhibited a kind of behavior that whites either regarded as "threatening" (Scenes 1-3) or unduly assertive, aggressive, or hostile (Scenes 2, 4). They also reveal a pattern of disagreement with respect to the significance of the black speech behavior: whites in each instance interpreting the black behavior to be more aggressive, hostile, or belligerent than did blacks. What I propose to do here is to account for these different interpretations by:

1. Pointing to some different black and white cultural assumptions and values toward assertive/expressive behavior in general;

2. Identifying significant differences in what appear to be similar conventions of aggressive language use within the black and white communities;

3. Showing how these different cultural assumptions, values, and conventions of aggressive language use affect black and white interpretations of the kind of black speech behavior exhibited in the above examples.

Finally, I will consider some other implications of the cultural variation described here, specifically as it relates to further black-white interaction, social intervention, and legal interpretation.

Some General Cultural Assumptions About Assertive/Expressive Behavior

Black and white cultural forms reflect opposite organizing principles, values and assumptions, with regard to assertive and expressive behavior. For example, black forms are valued that are not restricting in their assertive or expressive capacities. This applies to speech generally (Harrison 1972; Reisman 1974) and to such specific black speech forms and patterns as rapping, sounding, woofing (Kochman 1970; Abrahams 1976), call and response (Holt 1972; Daniel and Smitherman 1976), testifyin' (Smitherman 1977) as well as to the more conventional speech forms: argument, cursing, joking, boasting, etc. (Reisman 1974). Consequently, what Reisman says of the function of speech for Afro-Antiguans, can be said for Afro-Americans generally (1974:67): "Speech is organized as a form of assertion. It is also closely tied to spontaneous expression of feelings". These notions also extend to other black cultural forms like song, dance and drum (Harrison 1972; Wharton and Daniel 1977), and penetrates even to the more mundane acts of everyday life. As Harrison put it (1972:73):

> Rather than simply walk, we move: the swaying swagger of the hips and the bouncing, bobbing, head-shoulder motion associated

> with bopping are derived from a strong, rhythmic mode of walking (emphasis is Harrison's);

or (p. 33):

> Clothes . . . are not simply worn to cover the body; they are designed by the wearer to affect a magical attitude . . . It's all about power: when one hits the turbulence of the streets, one must know before passing the door of the house that one's magic is complete.

By way of contrast, white forms are valued that tend to check those impulses from within that give rise to assertive or expressive behavior. This is because speech patterns and other forms of behavior are organized with reference to social factors. Feeling itself is one of the early victims of social life, sacrificed "in the interest of order, efficiency, intellectual effort and even justice" (Vendler 1977:10). Self-assertion is considered a social entitlement, regulated either with respect to one's place in the social hierarchy, or by conventions that are part of the ceremony of social occasions or ritual of everyday social encounters (Slater 1976:65). Politeness is conceived as showing concern for the feeling of others, but only those others who themselves are behaving non-assertively. [1] Corporate or institutional etiquette generally requires that self-assertion be low key: regulated by courtesy, modesty and self-restraint even in situations where one has greater status

(Alihan 1970:9-10). Therefore, those interactional patterns are valued that are dispassionate: discussion rather than argument. Even play is idealized that is serious, methodical, efficient and purposeful: characterized by understatement rather than exhibitionism. "Showing off" is considered in "bad taste". "Good taste" shows restraint. What is restrained is self-assertion and those modes of expression that have the capacity to arouse and excite.

> Clothes must be drab and inconspicuous, colors of low intensity, smells non-existent. Sounds should be quiet, words should lack emotion (Slater 1976:115).

Cultural Assumptions About Self-Control

Consistent with the organizing principles of their respective cultures with regard to assertive/expressive behavior, blacks conceive of self-control in terms of exhibition: managing the feelings that ritually find release through many of the black cultural forms listed above ("An emotion is never out of control when it fits the modality it is released in", Harrison 1972:157). Whites conceive of self-control in terms of inhibition: restricting or repressing feelings through forms that ritually provide no outlet for their release. The behavioral consequence of these different enculturation processes is that blacks, in contrast to whites, become better able to manage the higher levels of feeling and heat that get expressed in interaction, whether as actor or as receiver, without becoming overwhelmed by them. Moreover, their assumptions about whether people are in control are based upon enculturated notions about what people can tolerate who are so trained. This is also true of whites. But since whites are enculturated to repress the impulses from within, their tolerance for emotionally heated encounters relative to blacks is lower both in terms of their ability to interactionally manage the expression of their own feelings or to receive the emotional or offended sensibilities of others. Consequently, whites often feel themselves losing self-control or consider to be "out of control" situations that blacks still conceive to be quite manageable.

Differences in What Appear to be Similar Conventions of Language Use

Argument and Discussion

Both blacks and whites use argument to verbally express anger and hostility. Argument here consists of passion (anger), heat, loudness, and confrontation. But there are also important differences. One difference is that blacks also use a form of argument to negotiate issues, resolve disagreement, and settle disputes. Structurally, it resembles the form of argument that is used to express anger and hostility in that it also consists of feeling, heat, loudness, and dynamic opposition. But there are also critical differences, such as in the quality of feeling and its level of intensity: thus earnestness or spiritual force rather than passion (anger), as well as in the nature of the dynamic opposition: adversarial rather than antagonistic. [2]

The white interpretation arises because whites only use one form of argument, not two, namely argument for ventilating anger and hostility. For negotiating issues, resolving disagreement and settling disputes, whites use discussion, that structurally, is devoid of emotion, heat, loudness and dynamic

opposition. [3] Consequently, when blacks assume their customary argumentative stance and in the process introduce those elements that for them are simply the inescapable accompaniments of advocating and/or defending a point of view, whites respond to what the presence of these elements signifies to them: namely, an intent to ventilate anger and hostility. The cross-cultural result is what occurred in the meeting between Woodrow Wilson and Monroe Trotter (Scene Four) in which Wilson accused Trotter of manifesting a "tone of passion", but which Trotter saw simply as "earnestness". [4] This also operated to some extent in Scene Two in the encounter between the white and black faculty member.[5]

Arguments and Fights

There is another important difference in the way that blacks and whites conceive of that form of argument that functions for both as a ventilation of anger and hostility. That has to do with the different degree of confidence that whites and blacks have with regard to whether expressions of anger and hostility can be managed at the verbal level without violence resulting. White confidence in this regard is quite low, perhaps in part due to an enculturation of self-control that practices repression but not managed expression of anger and other emotional impulses. Thus, once angry feelings are released, whites, lacking cultural reference, consider self-control to be no longer operative or possible. Consequently, they feel intervention by outsiders at a point shortly after the initial angry outburst is necessary if violence is to be prevented. As mediator, their role is to exhort those arguing to "keep calm" or even, to one or the other antagonist, to "keep quiet", while attempting to mitigate the force of their dynamic opposition by "keeping the antagonists apart". Should they be unable to do so, they will feel with increasing certainty that violence will result. This is because whites conceptualize the expression of hostility to be on a single angry words/violent action continuum, with the fight "having begun" (even before blows have been actually thrown) when they feel violence to be "imminent".

This conception is certainly represented in the pattern of behavior exhibited by the white Louisville teacher in Scene Three. It is also confirmed by white couples who speak of "having an argument" as "fighting". It is also represented in the behavioral response of the white female faculty member in Scene Two in viewing the behavior of the black male faculty member as "threatening", that is, in viewing his anger to be on a hostility-belligerence continuum which at some point could be expected to escalate from angry words into violent action. Finally, it is represented in the white juror's interpretation of the Black Panthers aggressive posturing as "threats".

Threats

The white juror's interpretation that the statements of the Panthers were "threats" in Scene One, was not only influenced by the generally aggressive and defiant posture of the Panthers but by what the Panther's themselves <u>said</u> they would do if attacked (Newton, in Seale, 1970:406): "So if they attack us or try to kill us . . . we'll defend ourselves. We'll off any pig who attacks us." Notwithstanding that Panther statements of this kind were qualified by the notion of self-defense ("The people have got to know that we don't believe in murder but only in self-defense . . . and the gun has to be seen as a proper tool in defending ourselves", pp. 406-407), a critical issue here is to what extent those statements can be taken literally. The white jurors, reflecting the conventions of such use of language in the white community, interpreted them as bonafide threats, since the rule in the white community is "Don't make statements that intend aggression unless you're ready to carry them out". Those that don't, in barroom jargon are referred to as "blowhards" presumably because they were "all talk and no action": that is, were not able to physically "back up" their verbal hostility and aggression. The idea that

statements intending aggression can be said between two male antagonists without violence resulting or one of them "backing down" is alien to the white conception here. Verbal "threats" for whites are not conceptualized as a surrogate for physical aggression but as a prelude to it: thus, are invariably provocative. Consequently, only by one or the other antagonist fighting or "backing down" can the white conception be said to be programmatically satisfied .

For blacks however, verbal aggression is conceived as functioning independently or as a surrogate for physical aggression. This is exemplified by the statements of the black male faculty member in Scene Two who said, "So long as I'm talking, you don't have to worry. When I stop talking, then you might have to worry", suggesting to the white female faculty member that his hostility is sustainable at the verbal level and not itself a foreshadowing of or a prelude to violence. The same idea is conveyed in his final statement, "All I did was talk to her. Now how can that be threatening?" The same conception and behavioral pattern is operative on the street in the distinction that blacks make between woofing and humbugging. As Keiser reported from his fieldwork among the Vice Lords in

Chicago (1969:44):

> "There are two kinds of behavior that are expected in situations of enmity. Vice Lords call these "whuffing" and "humbugging". Whuffing is the exchanging of insults and challenges to fight, while humbugging is actual fighting. Not all situations of enmity end in humbugging. Individuals who assume the identities Vice Lord and Enemy, respectively, can play out their social interaction solely in terms of whuffing."

Finally, where white couples tend to see arguing <u>as</u> fighting, as different forms of the <u>same</u> thing, black couples don't. As one of my black students put it:

> "A white husband and wife will say they "had a fight last night" even though it turns out all they had was an argument. But when you hear a black husband and wife say they "had a fight", physical blows were struck; they weren't just arguing" (Allen Harris).

Woofing

Blacks generally recognized the aggressive behavior of the Black Panthers to be woofing. As one black man from Mobile, Alabama said, decrying the Panther stance from a tactical perspective (Murray, 1970:278): "All that wolfing and now y'all got gun control worse than ever". Thus, I would assume that it was this behavior that the black jurors in the first scene had in mind when they characterized the statements of Black Panthers, like "off the pig", to be "rhetorical", as well as the behavior that the black students from Louisville in Scene Three had as cultural reference when they said to the white teacher, "Why did you send them down to the principal's office for fighting? They weren't going to do anything".

But what is it about woofing that would give blacks "reasonable doubt" that violence will necessarily evolve from it, as in Scene One, or make them fairly certain, as in Scene Three, that fighting will not result? There are three reasons for it that I have been able to discover. The first is the one that has just been discussed: that blacks generally conceive of hostile words and violent acts to be different things (not as whites believe: different forms of the <u>same</u> thing); consequently,

where anger and hostility can be sustained at the verbal level without violence necessarily resulting. The second reason has to do with the dramatic aspect of woofing, that is, the degree to which woofing is an act or functions as play. The third reason has to do with what blacks themselves consider to be provocative behavior, specifically, what conventionally signifies an intent to fight, or makes blacks conceptualize a fight to "have begun". I will deal with these last two ideas in turn.

Cultural Ritual as Drama

Members of cultures whose forms generally allow for expression are often ritually required to manifest it even when the feeling behind the expression is absent. Thus, LaBarre spoke about "old Mary Buffalo" at her brother's funeral who

> wept in a frenzy, tore her hair, scratched her cheeks, and even tried to jump into the grave (being conveniently restrained from this by remoter relatives). I happened to know that she had not seen her brother for some time, and there was no love lost between them: she was merely carrying on the way a decent woman should among the Kiowa. Away from the grave, she was immediately chatting vivaciously about some other topic (1947:54-55).

Moreover, this form of shamming is not restricted to formal occasions but extends to everyday interactions also. Thus Ihugh, a Tiv male from Nigeria remarked (Bowen 1964:99): "It is necessary to frighten wives from time to time, but it is foolish to feel the anger one should show." Shamming of this kind is also effectively practiced by elementary school teachers; that is, they show, but do not necessarily feel,

anger, disappointment, etc., such that they can scold one child in an angry tone of voice, and then almost instantaneously, smile sweetly to another child with whom they are not angry. So is shamming a phenomenon in Afro-American culture where rituals require a certain pattern of behavior, and "call and response" often becomes a call for a response if no response is forthcoming or the response given is regarded by the performer as inadequate. So a preacher will exhort his congregation (Holt 1972:193) "Do I hear a witness?" or "Can I get a witness?" or simply ". . . hunh? (Meaning "Am I right", or "You ain't listening to me".). Likewise a black performer might reproach her audience, as happened at one black high school in the school auditorium after school, for "letting her work hard up there on the stage all by herself" (the black high school students in the audience were not responding the way they were supposed to).

Woofing as Drama

Woofing and other forms of black aggressive behavior also function as drama, especially on the street, where the goal is to achieve and maintain an image of being fearless and tough: someone not to be trifled with, often with the hope that once achieved, it won't be necessary to prove it. Liebow's description of Tally in this respect is apt (1966:23):

> He is six feet tall and weighs just under two hundred pounds. His size and carriage lend credibility to the general belief that he was once a professional heavyweight fighter. When asked to affirm or deny this status, Tally merely grins, assumes the classic stance of the boxer, and invites the questioner to "come on". No one does.

Woofing itself consists of verbal insults, taunts, and boasts, directed at some adversary. It can be <u>for real</u>, as a surrogate for physical combat, as Keiser indicated between <u>Vice Lord</u> and <u>Enemy</u> for example (1969:44), or it can be an act: a form of put-on; in both instances woofing relies on drama to achieve pragmatic ends. However, to say that it is a put-on implies only that those woofing have become aware that they do not need to feel the hostility they need to show. It should not

imply that the behavior necessarily becomes obvious as a sham. Quite the contrary: for woofing as a put-on to be dramatically effective typically relies upon observers, or even one's antagonist, being unable to detect whether the person engaged in woofing is being serious or not, and to keep people wondering in this regard, as Abrahams has noted (1976:41), is part of the deception.

Muhammad Ali, as one of the more artful practitioners of woofing, provided several public examples of it, such as at the weigh-in ceremony before the first Sonny Liston fight (Ali 1975: 115ff.), or the "confrontation" with Joe Frazier outside Frazier's gym in Philadelphia (pp. 250ff.). In his book, Ali indicates that both encounters were staged: the one with Liston for the purpose of dramatizing their upcoming fight, the one with Frazier to mobilize public support for an Ali-Frazier fight that the boxing commission would not permit by their refusal to grant Ali a license. But even here where the woofing was staged, Ali indicates (p. 259) that Frazier at one point had difficulty determining whether Ali was acting or not (although Ali seemed to have little difficulty making this distinction about Frazier):

> His eyes are blazing and I know suddenly that the pretense is gone and this is no put-on. Joe has always been a little slow in making out whether or not I'm serious or putting on . . .

Of course, Frazier was not alone in having difficulty making this distinction about Ali. Even those who knew him well, such as his trainer, occasionally had this problem:

> Now I see a blow . . . coming. It starts out for the pit of my stomach, but suddenly curves and crashes into my ribs. The pain is like a terrible toothache shooting through bones, up the spine, up the back of my head. I hang there, my back against the ropes . . . Then I slide slowly down the ropes to the canvas. On the way down . . . I see some startled faces, wide eyes, the crowd in the gym rushing up to the ring: "Is he hurt?" . . . "Is he faking?" . . . . I stretch out on the canvas and feel Bundini's arms lifting my shoulders, his mouth to my ear. "You sure make it look real, Champ." . . . He's seen me go through this act a dozen times just to liven up the gym—but now he's not sure what it is. I know what it is. (Ali, p. 292, emphasis added).

Moreover, this difficulty in detecting whether someone is putting on or not seems to be a general one for members of the black community. Consider for example, Maryland's interpretation of the crowd's behavior in the following woofing exchange between the principal interactants, Sweet Red and Black Power (1972:212ff.):

> Red saw the change in conversation as an opportune time to leave without losing face. Red moved toward the door, saying, "I'm going to step now, and make this little run". However, Pretty Black wasn't ready to let Red ease out of the confrontation between Red and Black Power which he was trying to bring about. He therefore asked loudly, "Running to what, and from Black Power"?
> "Man, motherfuck you and Black Ass Power", retorted Red, as he stopped with annoyance before reaching the door. The crowd whooped and hollered with laughter, for they knew the signifying was really on.
> "Pity a poor fool brothers, for he knoweth not what's happening. He's a lost sheep in a pasture of white bullshit", commented Black Power.
> Red angrily shouted, "Lost my ass, nigger! What about all that shit you've been pulling with them damn white hippie bitches? You going around here with that damn white collar turned backwards talking shit about you being somebody's savior from the East! You ain't shit! Some of these young <u>real</u> black brothers ought to beat that holy shit outa you!"

> The tempo of the signifying had grown stronger and stronger; the crowd made fewer and fewer comments, not sure of whether or not the two participants were still signifying or were "for real" . . . (emphasis added).

Given the difficulty that blacks have differentiating woofing that is for real from that which is a put-on, would certainly keep the black jurors in Scene One, from being able to declare unequivocably that violence was intended or forthcoming, especially since violence would be a less likely consequence if the woofing proved to be done as much for dramatic effect as to express real anger and hostility.

Woofing as Play

That woofing can also function as a put-on allows us to extend our earlier hypothesis regarding black self-control in the following way: to say not only that blacks are enculturated to develop (relative to whites) higher levels of tolerance for assertive/expressive behavior generally, but more specifically, that they learn also to engage in verbally aggressive confrontations without violence necessarily erupting. How this ability develops is directly related to woofing and other speech events (like sounding, signifying, playing the dozens) functioning as play and the more general relationship that exists between the world of play and the real world. It is this that I wish to discuss briefly here.

Abrahams, among others, has pointed out (1976:40ff.) that play relies upon the distinction between it and the "real" or "serious". Furthermore, for play to function effectively as play—in this case woofing as a put-on—"there must be a sense of threat arising from the 'real' and 'serious' world of behavior. The threat of incursions from the real world must be constant" (Abrahams, p. 40). This is clearly evident in the verbal confrontation between Sweet Red and Black Power where the question as to the seriousness of their verbal exchange added to the

interactional tension and in doing so had the effect of increasing the surrounding player's enjoyment ("If you grin, you're in!"). Yet it is precisely at the point where the tension is raised and the threat from the real world is greatest that black players learn to develop their ability to sustain verbal aggression, which ability can then be used in instances where the verbal aggression is, or has the clear potential for becoming, serious. Thus, even though the staged verbal confrontation between Ali and Frazier mentioned above, suddenly became serious for Frazier ("His eyes are blazing and I know suddenly that the pretense is gone"), both Frazier and Ali were still able to withstand each other's verbal assaults and manage to sustain the expression of their public antagonism at the verbal level.

The effect of play in exercising and developing mental toughness and agility ("We exercised our minds by playing the dozens", Brown 1969:27) highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between play and the real world: not only play deriving its potency from constant "threats of incursions from the real world", but the converse: the threats and aggression of the real world being regulated by constraints and devices derived from the world of play. For example in the games of verbal insult that blacks call <u>sounding</u> and <u>playing the dozens</u>,

there is a strong prohibition against the principal players becoming violent (generally enforced by the other group participants in the contest) even though the aim of the principal players might be "to get a dude so mad that he'd cry or get mad enough to fight" (Brown 1969:27). The following example illustrates the game and the function of the group in this regard (Kochman 1970:158-59):

> Frank looked up and saw Leroy enter the Outpost. Leroy walked past the room where Quinton, Nap, Pretty Black, Cunny, Richard, Haywood, Bull, and Reese sat playing cards. As Leroy neared the T.V. room, Frank shouted to him.
>
> FRANK: Hey, Leroy, your mama—calling you man.
>
> Leroy turned and walked toward the room where the sound came from. He stood in the door and looked at Frank.
>
> LEROY: Look motherfuckers, I don't play that shit.
>
> FRANK (signifying): Man, I told you cats 'bout that mama jive (as if he were concerned about how Leroy felt).
>
> LEROY: That's all right Frank; you don't have to tell those funky motherfuckers nothing; I'll fuck me up somebody yet.

Frank's face lit up as if he were ready to burst his side laughing. Cunny became pissed at Leroy.

CUNNY: Leroy, you stupid bastard, you let Frank make a fool of you. He said that 'bout your mama.

PRETTY BLACK: Aw, fat ass head, Cunny shut up.

CUNNY: Ain't that some shit. This black slick head motor flicker got nerve 'nough to call somebody fathead. Boy, you so black, you sweat super Permalube Oil.

This eased the tension of the group as they burst into loud laughter.

PRETTY BLACK: What'chu laughing 'bout Nap, with your funky mouth smelling like dog shit.

Even Leroy laughed at this.

NAP: Your mama motherfucker.

PRETTY BLACK: Your funky mama too.

NAP (strongly): It takes twelve barrels of water to make a steamboat run; it takes an elephant's dick to make your Grandmammy come; she been elephant fucked, camel fucked and hit side the head with your Grandpappy's nuts.

REESE: Goddor damn; go on and rap motherfucker.

Reese began slapping each boy in his hand, giving his approval of Nap's comment. Pretty Black, in an effort not to be outdone but directing his verbal play elsewhere, stated:

PRETTY BLACK: Reese, what you laughing 'bout? You so square you shit bricked shit.

FRANK: Whoooowee!

REESE (sounded back): Square huh, what about your nappy ass hair before it was stewed; that shit was so bad till, when you went to bed at night, it would leave your head and go on the corner and meddle.

The boys slapped each other in the hand and cracked up.

PRETTY BLACK: On the streets meddling, bet Dinky didn't offer me no pussy and I turned it down.

FRANK: Reese scared of pussy.

PRETTY BLACK: Hell yeah; the greasy mother rather fuck old, ugly, funky cock Sue Willie than get a piece of ass from a decent broad.

FRANK: Goddor damn! Not Sue Willie.

PRETTY BLACK: Yeah ol'meat beating Reese rather screw that crosseyed, clapsy bitch, who when she cry, tears drip down her ass.

HAYWOOD: Don't be so mean, Black.

REESE: Aw shut up, you half-white bastard.

FRANK: Wait man, Haywood ain't gonna hear much more of that half-white shit; he's a brother too.

REESE: Brother, my black ass; that white ass landlord gotta be this motherfucker's paw.

CUNNY: Man, you better stop foolin' with Haywood; he's turning red.

HAYWOOD: Fuck yall (as he withdrew from the "sig" game).

FRANK: Yeah, fuck yall; let's go to the stick hall.

Of course there may be a real interest on the part of an interactant to reduce tension rather than to maintain or increase it by <u>obviously</u> defining an instance of verbal aggression as play and thereby hope to defuse the potential for violence in such a situation.[6] Wicker provides such an example of a verbal confrontation that took place between him and a black man in 1946 on a troop train that was to take him and other sailors from Seattle, Washington to Virginia to be discharged. The trip would take about two weeks and Wicker was put in charge of the railroad car which, besides himself, included two other whites and twenty seven blacks (1975:158):

"Hey you, Red!"

Silence fell on the car like soot from a steam engine.

"Yeah," Wicker said.

"Suck my black dick."

Half of the blacks laughed, a little uncertainly. Most of the others and the two other whites pretended not to notice. One or two blacks eyed Wicker stonily. He could not tell whether he was being teased or challenged by the tall black, but as he stood with the other whites by the tier of bunks they had appropriated for themselves, he was astonished by the outburst—astonished in the perenniel Southern manner that the tall black thought there was any reason to be hostile, even more astonished that a black man would dare to speak so to a white. He was not so liberated from his Southern background as he had thought, and he perceived that he would have to deal with this other youth as a Southern white man would deal with a colored person, whether nigger, nigruh, or Negro, and back it up; or else he would have to deal with him as one human with another and live with the consequences.

Wicker decided on the latter course of action, as he put it, not thinking about his response, with the following happy result:

"Why, your buddy there told me you didn't even have one."

A fragment of an old joke had flickered in his memory.

"Said a hog bit it off."

"Shee-it." The tall black sailor grinned. The other blacks laughed, all of them this time, some obviously in relief, some in derision of the tall boy as he thought up his reply. "You git home, man, you ask your girl friend, see if I ain't broke it off in her pussy." The blacks howled with laughter.

"After mine," Wicker said, hoping for the best, "I reckon she wouldn't even feel that little old biddy toothpick of yours."

There was more laughter and backslapping, and even the other white boys grinned, rather painfully.

"Hey, Red," another black called, amiably. "You the head man, when we gone chow down?"

Just then the train lurched off; there was a rush to the windows and doors, breaking up the exchange. One of the white boys lingered with Wicker.

"Ought to have bust his black ass," he said.

"We got to live on this thing," Wicker nodded at the crowded car. "A week, two weeks. We don't need fights and hard feelings."

"All the same, you got to . . ."

Wicker knew what was about to be said and broke in: "We got to live with 'em, that's what we got to do." He walked away, deciding he would give the white sailor the first latrine detail, just on general principles and to balance

the ticket a little. Maybe that would keep him in his place. Boldly, he punched the tall black sailor in the ribs. "Hey, Big Shot, where you from?"

In obviously defining the situation as one of play—for Wicker "joking" and for the black sailor "sounding"—Wicker was aided by the fact that the opening remark of the black sailor could be defined as play: that in each of their referent cultures there was an analogous pattern of behavior that functioned as play within which the black sailor's opening remark would fit. Thus, not only do select rules within play, such as the prohibition against violence in verbal aggression that is defined as play, act as constraints on verbal aggression that is serious, but the very existence of the activity of verbal aggression as play, allowed Wicker to consider the black sailor's opening remark to be ambiguous (was Wicker being teased or challenged?). This enabled him to create and maintain harmony in a situation that, if the option to interpret the Black sailor's remark as play did not exist, he would otherwise have had to take seriously, with the effect that the potential for violence in the situation would have become considerably greater. In such ways do specific rules governing verbal insult in sounding and playing the dozens, and the existence of the activity of sounding as play itself, become transferable and serviceable in enabling blacks to manage verbal aggression in the real world without violence resulting. [7]

Applying this entire discussion of woofing to the interpretation that black jurors in Scene One gave to Black Panther behavior,

it becomes clearer why they should have regarded it as "rhetoric" rather than as a "threat". To the extent that Panther woofing was "for real" (expressive) and especially so if it was self-conscious drama (manipulative), its public purpose and effect would be as much to publicize (through drama) the discriminatory social policies and police abuses that victimize black people in their community, as to instill fear. In conjunction with their enculturated notion of self-control—specifically, also derived from the function of woofing as play—along with their conception that angry words and violent acts are two different things, and that woofing, however menacing in appearance, is still just talking, the black jurors would seem to have had no other recourse than to interpret Panther behavior as "rhetoric". Likewise, the black high school students in Scene Three who felt that the two black male high school students engaged in woofing were "not going to do anything". For blacks, the establishment of an aggressive and menacing posture is not itself a sufficient indication that violence is intended or forthcoming, let alone imminent.

When a Fight Conceptually "Begins" for Blacks

"W'en coon take water he fixin' fer ter fight"

Plantation Proverb (Brewer 1968, p. 314).

Of course, the black interpretation of what is not a sufficient indication that violence is imminent is also influenced by what blacks conventionally consider to be the sign that someone intends to fight: thus, is the behavior that they would regard as "provocative". What that behavior is, within the context of an angry confrontation, is a movement. As one of my black students put it:

> If two guys are talkin' loud and then one or the other starts to reduce the distance between them, that's a sign because it's important to get in the first blow. Or if a guy puts his hand in his pocket and that's not part of his normal stance, then you watch for that—he might be reaching for a knife. But if they're just talkin'—doesn't matter how loud it gets—then you got nothin' to worry about (Allen Harris).

A nice interactional example showing movement to be the critical focal point for blacks when the level of anger and hostility has reached a certain point is taken from the record "The Flying

Saucer Song" (Nilsson, Sandman RCA APL1-1031). Two black men are in a bar. One (A) is trying to convince the other (B) that the strange light he saw the other night was that of a flying saucer. The part of their conversation relevant to the present discussion begins with B's response:

B: That's the dumbest story I've ever heard in my life.

A: What you mean? I'm tellin' you the truth.

B: That's nice. Uh. But did you ever hear the one about the guy with the wooden eye?

A: Hey. Now don't do that to me man. I mean. Well, listen. Let me put it to you this way. Listen.

B: Shit! You know something. You're crazy. You know that?

A: Hey. Don't you call me crazy man. Let me ask you something. What would you have done man?

B: Well, to begin with I wouldn't have told this story. You understand?

A: That's easy for you to say. But it happened to me. You know what I mean?

B: Listen man. Don't be some asshole. You tryin' to pull my —

A: Hey! You called me an asshole . . .

B: It's just that you are an asshole; understand?

A: Hey! You know something? You know what's going to happen to you?

B: Now, listen. Don't you raise that glass, understand? (emphasis added).

A: Hey! You know what I could do if I wanted to get . . . Hey you going to make me angry here. I'm just tryin' to talk to you . . . (emphasis added).

Should A have picked up a glass at that point, B would have considered that movement provocative. [8] Similarly, one of my black female students remembered that a fight she had in high school started when "the other girl reached into her purse" after the two of them had been arguing (Lillie Kitchen). Thus, what constitutes a provocation for blacks is a movement at some point within the context of an angry confrontation. A public example of this is the encounter between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier after their first fight when both were being interviewed by Howard Cosell on Channel Seven's Wide World of Sports. As usually happens when Ali and Frazier publicly interact, they begin to woof on each other, with Ali, being the more verbally adept, scoring most of the points. Among the things Ali did was address Frazier as "Roy" (rhymes with boy, a derogatory term of address in the black community). But it was when Ali called Frazier ignant ('grossly stupid', from ignorant)[9] that Frazier got up out of his chair and stood directly in front of Ali who was

then still sitting down.

At that point, one could see Ali's and Frazier's handlers enter the T.V. picture, showing their own apprehension over the situation, since from their perspective, and that of black people generally, Frazier's move constituted a real provocation or threat in that context. Therefore, rather than wait to see what Frazier was going to do, Ali grabbed Frazier's arms and held him down until they could be separated by their respective handlers. In a later interview, Ali acknowledged that he "did not know what Frazier was going to do".

Another public example of a confrontation which led to a fight occurred in the 1977-78 season in the National Basketball Association between Kermit Washington and Rudy Tomjanovich. It began when Tomjanovich made a move toward Washington with the intent, according to Tomjanovich, "to break up a fight" that had begun or was about to begin between Washington and someone else. This, Washington interpreted as provocative and following the rule that "it is important to get in the first blow", swung first, breaking Tomjanovich's jaw in the process. In reacting so, Washington was responding to what Tomjanovich's move would typically signify to blacks in the context in which it occurred. That Tomjanovich indicated later that he was intervening as "peacemaker" is almost beside the point, since the intention signaled by his move at the time that he made it was unclear, and Washington was not going to wait until Tomjanovich hit him to

clarify what the movement toward him meant.

Because movement within the context of a confrontation is considered provocative, it can also be used to sucker an opponent into throwing a punch. For example, a black friend of mine (Fred Ramey) was taking the night train from Chicago to Kansas City when a black porter told him to turn out his light. He told the porter that he wished to continue reading and would keep his light on. The porter left and came back ten minutes later to repeat his request. My friend indicated that he still hadn't finished reading, wanting the same consideration that "he knew at the least would have been accorded a little white old lady". The porter left and came back to repeat his request a third time at which point my friend asked to "see his boss". At that point the porter "made a move toward his pocket" which my friend saw, but didn't respond to, "seeing the play for what it was", namely as an attempt to provoke him into throwing a punch which could then serve as the basis of an official assault charge. That such a move could serve the purpose of entrapment is here further indication of its provocative significance within such a context for members of the black community. [10]

The black juror's perspective that interpreted the statements of the Black Panthers to be rhetorical rather than

threatening in Scene One, can be analyzed as also having taken into account the absence of any offensive movement on the part of the Panthers to kill policemen. Similarly, the black high school students' perspective would have taken into account the absence of any movement on the part of either of the two black male antagonists beyond that of establishing a confrontation to arrive at their conclusion that "they weren't going to do anything". In conjunction with the other conventions of language use in their community, described above: woofing, through which hostility and anger can be ventilated and managed without necessarily becoming violent, and the general black conception that sees arguing and fighting as two different things, led blacks in both instances to the interpretation that, until someone actually makes a move to do something, you can't know that they will simply because they say so or because of the manner in which they say it. Quite often the contrary is indicated: a menacing or aggressive posture to blacks signifies that a person does <u>not</u> want to fight, that their intention is to use woofing (drama!) <u>rather than</u> physical force to achieve their objective. This is implicit in the statement of one black man from Mobile, Alabama who said (Murray 1970:277), "Look . . . if you really getting ready to do something to somebody, it don't make sense to tip them off, Man".

Further Implications

The different cultural perspectives on aggressive behavior presented here have further implications for black/white interaction, social intervention, and for legal interpretation.

Black/White Interaction

We have already indicated that blacks and whites have different cultural assumptions and conceptions over what constitutes a threat or will precipitate a fight. A representative summary statement would be that blacks conceive that anger and hostility can be expressed verbally without violence necessarily resulting. This even extends to more menacing behavior, such as woofing, which, in addition to manifesting an aggressive confrontational posture also contains verbal threats and insults. Consequently, blacks believe that until someone actually makes an aggressive move within such a context, one cannot be sure that they will, simply by referring to how loud or abusive the antagonists are talking. [11]

Whites, on the other hand, already consider to be subversive and provocative black's use of argument in the context of resolving disagreement and settling disputes, since whites feel that argument functions as a ventilation of anger and hostility but is dysfunctional

in resolving disagreement because of the level of emotional intensity in argument which they feel makes it irrational. Moreover, should blacks also invest their argumentative posture with anger, whites will interpret black behavior to be "threatening" based on their view that angry words and violent acts are on the same belligerence continuum ("arguing is a form of fighting"). Should the black verbal confrontation also contain verbal threats and insults, whites will feel with increasing certainty that violence is both intended and forthcoming. In the white community, threats are interpreted as intentional and on an action timetable; consequently, they are always provocative.

Affecting both black and white conceptions are their different enculturated notions of what constitutes self-control. Whites have little experience managing emotional and heated interactions, because self-control for them is conceived in terms of repression of emotion and avoidance of confrontation. Consequently, the presence of such features leads them to believe that such situations are unmanageable. Blacks do not conceive of such situations as "out of control" however, because they have been enculturated to manage emotional confrontations, even those involving verbal insults and threats, without becoming overwhelmed by them. [12]

Who will hit first? Whites will assess the level of intensity of the emotion, heat and dynamic opposition manifested in angry confrontation to be volatile, that blacks still consider to be manageable. Consequently, the probability in such a situation is

that whites will hit first believing violence to be imminent and the situation simply being one of "get them before they get you". [13]

Blacks will consider a movement within the context of angry confrontation (argument) as provocative that whites intend as innocent (the move itself is ambiguous), as in the publicized Washington/Tomjanovich encounter. In such situations, the probability is that the black person will hit first, believing violence to be imminent and the situation simply being one of "get them before they get you". [14]

Social Intervention

In the larger social context the white cultural perspective works to the disadvantage of blacks in that whites will believe blacks to be acting in a threatening or provocative manner when they are not; this enables whites to initiate repressive measures while believing that, in doing so, they are acting defensively: "getting them before they get you", when in fact they are acting offensively. Even more cynically, it enables law enforcement agencies to act offensively deliberately and yet attempt to legitimate their repressive actions against black dissidents, such as the Black Panthers, by using as reference the white cultural perspective that would tend to interpret the defiant posture of blacks, or their more assertive/aggressive speech behavior, as "threatening". [15]

Legal Interpretation

When white cultural norms alone guide the social interpretation of behavior and events the potential for injustice in cases involving cultural minorities obviously increases. This is also true in the area of legal interpretation. [16] For example, both "fighting words" and "incitement to riot" statutes make a presumption about the capacity of the "average addressee" or "average citizen" to endure or withstand verbal abuse. In so doing they touch upon matters that relate to the enculturation of self-control which we have discussed above with respect to blacks and whites. [17] For instance, we pointed out that white culture relatively speaking, enculturates its members to a lower tolerance for emotionally heated (high stimulus) interaction. Consequently, because whites find it difficult to successfully manage such interaction themselves, they also believe that no one else can either. Black culture, on the other hand, in granting greater rights of self-assertion and self-expression to its members, also enculturates them to receive such assertions without loss of self-control. To establish interactional equilibrium, a more potent offense must necessarily generate a more potent defense. Consequently, whites and blacks are likely to assess interactions that weigh the force of a public speaker's verbal presentation against the audience's capacity to regulate its effect differently—with whites tending to judge the situation to be more "inflammable" or "inciteful" than blacks. For example,

this was shown when whites interpreted the public statements of "Black Power" advocates of the late sixties, like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael as "threatening violence". Yet Carmichael himself saw "Black Power" as a "black declaration of independence . . . a turn inward, a rallying cry for a people in the sudden labor of self-discovery, self-naming, and self-legitimization", (Scott and Brockriede, 1969:117, taken from Bennett, 1966:28).[18]

"Incitement" for Blacks"

Our analysis so far has indicated that an aggressive movement within the context of an angry confrontation between individuals is taken by blacks to be threatening and provocative. This same perspective holds true when the confrontation is between groups. So long as the dispute or disagreement is defined as "talking" there is the probability that violence won't occur. Of course the content of the message must also be taken into account here. But should the confrontation involve physical abuse, or a move in that direction, then a provocation, from the black perspective, has been clearly established. Thus it is significant that in the twenty-four cases of public disorder investigated closely by the U.S. Riot Commission (1969:177ff.), it was found that forty percent of "prior incidents" and fifty percent of "final incidents" that "triggered" or "precipitated" the outbreak of disorder, involved "allegedly abusive or discriminatory police action"; seventeen percent of "prior incidents" involved white "discrediting", intimidation or violence against blacks. Those "prior" or "final incidents" listed as "official inaction" also included instances where blacks had been physically assaulted by other blacks but where police did not intervene as they should have (e.g., Plainfield, New Jersey). Three of five protest rallies and meetings from which violence erupted dealt with "prior incidents" of "alleged police brutality" (p. 121). Finally, an investigation of the riot in Cambridge, Maryland,

allegedly "incited" by H. "Rap" Brown, led Harris to the conclusion that:

> It is more likely that the firing by police at the marchers led by Brown, and the alleged attack by the groups of armed whites, rather than Brown's speech, were the igniting factors of the subsequent uprising (1968:729, found in, and sustained by, Kennicott and Page 1971:334).

Taking Account of Cultural Variation

In Scene One, the white jurors were apparently ready to concede what the assumptions underlying the various statutes ("fighting words", "conspiracy", "incitement to riot") do not: the possible existence of cultural variation with respect to conventions of language use, and in the case of the Black Panther member specifically, the better qualifications of the black jurors to interpret black speech behavior.

In this latter respect the white jurors were behaving much like anthropologists who rely on native members of the culture to provide them with expert information about what constitutes appropriate behavior within their culture. It is from this information that anthropologists formulate the rules (principles and assumptions) that the people use, either implicitly or explicitly, to generate and interpret cultural behavior and events. [19]

But who can depend upon jurors regularly being more enlightened than the law? What if the jury composition had been all or predominantly white? Would the member of the Black Panther party have been convicted rather than acquitted of the conspiracy charge because the input of a black cultural perspective had been effectively excluded or muted? Clearly,

the notion that American society is culturally heterogenous is impotent if it merely acknowledges that people <u>have</u> different cultural patterns and perspectives but fails to find ways to incorporate them into the system, such that they can have a bearing on the formation of social policy, the social interpretation of behavior and events, and social intervention. [20]

Footnotes

"'Fighting Words' Black and White"

1 One has to "qualify" as an "other" by being at least a social equal and by not behaving selfishly. To be selfish is to assert the primacy of your own feelings. Those who do, forfeit the concern of others for their feelings. Thus, there is no need to be considerate of the person who plays his radio loudly on the bus or train. Rather, that person is the one thought to be "impolite", for letting his own feelings override those of others.

2 This form of argument is characteristic of predominantly oral societies (McLuhan 1964; Ong 1967, 1969) like that of blacks and other contemporary groups, even as it was of dominant white society a few generations back. It is characterized by a posture of offense and defense ("taking a stand"), what Ong calls the "approved polemic mold": passionate involvement in one's material and a feeling that there is an adversary at large (1967:225).

3 Whites insist upon the absence of emotion, and heat and loudness that are its by-products, because of their assumption that reason and emotion work against each other: that the presence of emotion detracts from the operation of reason (Kochman 1974). This idea is also reinforced by their notion of self-control: their lower tolerance (relative to blacks) for managing emotionally heated interactions. Both ideas in part, underlay the white faculty member's characterization of the communicative style of the community residents and minority faculty (Scene Two) as a "Baptist Revival meeting."

4 In anthropology it is axiomatic to say that function conditions perception. As the axiom applies here, it means that underlying black and white interpretations are their respective consideration of the function which a particular speech form serves in their own culture. Specifically, whites do not use argument for purposes of persuasion as blacks do, using discussion instead. Consequently, they don't need to distinguish as blacks do between the quality and intensity of feeling and opposition (that distinguish the two forms of argument) since that distinction is not functional for them as it is for blacks. The distinction whites do make is the one that is

4 (cont.)

critical for them in differentiating argument from discussion, namely, the presence (or absence) of emotion, heat, loudness, and dynamic opposition. The cross-cultural problem is that in responding simply to the presence of these elements and defining them in terms of what they would use them for, whites end up interpreting the spiritual intensity that blacks manifest in expressing a point of view as the initial expression of anger and hostility. But of course, this may not correspond to what blacks feel or intend at all.

5 The issues that whites and blacks tend to interact over in public are often those which have given blacks cause to feel angry and hostile, such as discrimination, unemployment, police harassment, etc. Consequently, the spiritual force that customarily characterizes the black interactional mode in these instances occasionally does become invested with irritation, frustration and anger. When this occurs, as in Scene Two, it tends to intensify the level of emotion and dynamic opposition still further and as might be expected, has the effect of reinforcing the white interpretation that blacks are more intent on ventilating anger and hostility than they are in promoting a "reasonable" resolution of

5 (cont.)

differences. Blacks of course, don't see their argumentative posture as inappropriate, nor their anger or moral indignation, considering the latter to be justifiable responses to the social abuses or neglect they have historically received in a racist society. Thus, when whites promote discussion as the means for resolving disagreement, and insist therefore that all emotion be suppressed (to maximize "rationality"), blacks balk. One reason they do is because suppressing feeling for blacks signifies an unwillingness to get involved: insincerity or deviousness. A second reason is that blacks feel their anger is not something that whites reasonably should expect them to subdue or even be able to suppress before the cause of their anger is remediated through negotiation. But there are also strategic implications to the use of each of these modes. For example, should blacks suppress their anger and spiritual intensity which whites require by insisting upon discussion as the proper mode of negotiation, whites will have gained as a prerequisite to negotiation what is often the objective of negotiation: namely, the reduction of the intensity of the political opposition, but without having had to make any concessions through negotiation to obtain it.

(Footnotes)

6 Woofing can also become transparent as play and it is in its transparent form that many blacks think of it. For example, some blacks consider it to be simply a male form of bragging, especially bragging about how bad one is, that is, in a mock serious manner, praising ones own "superior" attributes and abilities. As the talk may also focus on sexual prowess, woofing can also be a style of rapping (Cooke 1972:50-51). When it becomes transparent, woofing then simply functions as entertainment, like boasting, as the "making of one's noise" (Reisman 1974:60).

7 Labov (1972) also shows how a rule inherent to sounding: namely, to deny an insult is to concede that it might be true, enabled Rel, to use ritual verbal insult to diffuse the potency of a challenge by Stanley, and thus avoid a fight that Labov feels otherwise would have occurred, since "Stanley regularly insists on his status as president of the Jets; he never backs down from a challenge or backs away from a fight" (p. 305). Their brief verbal exchange went as follows (pp. 351ff.):

[7] (cont.)

REL (talking to the group as a whole, but especially to the lower status members): Shut up, please!
STANLEY (challenging Rel's right to tell him to be quiet): 'ey, you tellin' me?
REL: Yes.
STANLEY: Come a li'l closer.
REL: Your mother's a duck. Get outa here.
STANLEY: Come a li'l closer an' say —
REL: Your mother's a duck.

At this point Labov notes

> "Stanley withdrew his arm, looked around, and became involved with someone else".

Moreover, Labov's

> "understanding of why Stanley retreated is based on the definition of a sound as a ritual insult—one that is obviously not true. Though Stanley chooses to say, 'I take this personally', Rel puts him down by redefining the situation as a ritual one. Informally, the message is what are you carrying on for? This is just a game we're playing, and you know it—unless you mother is a duck. If Stanley insisted on taking the situation seriously, then he would be saying that it could be true—his mother could be a duck".

8 The previous statement, "You know what's going to happen to you", whites would consider as both threat and provocation. Blacks might consider it a "threat" but not threatening, that is, not of itself provocative.

9 The pronunciation is crucial for the meaning here. Thus, for a black person to call another ignant, is more insulting than to call them ignorant.

10 My friend and colleague Stan Newman thinks that the critical focus on movement in a confrontation is not just a black perspective but more generally a street perspective, thus one not applicable only to blacks. Indeed, policemen generally share the same view and people have gotten shot because they didn't "keep their hands in full view" at all times. In the following barroom scene in Gallup, New Mexico, the critical focus is identical to that of blacks; in fact the entire interactional pattern seems to be a replica of that of the black interactants in the Flying Saucer Song given above:

> A wiry young guy in a tan Levi's suit, hunched quietly over his Coors, keeps getting pushed by a heavyset drunk in a hardhat and work clothes:
> "Hey, buddy, buy me a drink."
> "Hey man, you an asshole, you know?"

10 (cont.)

> Finally, he shoves the guy's arm spilling his beer (emphasis added). All talk stops at the bar—it is showdown time. The little guy turns slowly and says, smiling, "Hey man, if you're feeling froggy, why don't you just jump?" The big hardhat draws back and swings on him, a roundhouse punch from way out in left field. But before it is halfway there, the little Navaho kicks the man's bar stool out from under him and then gives him a boot in the jaw—not hard, but hard enough. The big man gets up, rubbing his jaw, and heads unsteadily for the door. "There's an Airborne saying", the little guy says, "pick your enemy before he knows you're his enemy, and everything on the face comes out, or off. This guy got off easy" (Schultheis, 1978:33).

Of course there is a temptation here to consider this as an example of black cultural borrowing, especially since the expression of the Navaho: "If you feel froggy, why don't you just jump", as an invitation to fight, is one that is commonly heard among blacks, a variant being, "If you feel froggish, take a leap". Also, the Army Airborne would have been a place where the Navaho would have had extensive contact with blacks and thus an opportunity to borrow not only the expression but the perspective behind it. But there is no need to insist on black (African) origination here since blacks themselves may

10 (cont.)

have gotten it from the street or brought it with them from the South. For example, a white southerner indicated that he saw a fight between two men becoming closer to violence when the men, arguing loud at first, begin to quiet down and one of them "takes out his knife and starts to whittle with it at the same time as his voice becomes real low and emphatic". Thus the movement of "taking out the knife" is clearly part of the critical focus here, and one of my students (Bruce Spivey) indicated that a white Appalachian advised a friend with reference to someone hassling him in a bar, to "make a move on him".

11 It is tempting to conclude that it is <u>because</u> blacks cannot tell if a fight will result by referring to those features that they have shifted their focus to movement as a more reliable indicator of intent.

(Footnotes)

12 This does not mean that blacks might not also realize a point in interaction where the level of intensity of emotion or anger is such as to make them wonder whether it can be sustained at the verbal level. Rather, it is to assert that the level of intensity at which such a question might arise for them would be considerably higher than for whites based upon blacks' enculturated higher levels of tolerance.

13 Blacks who have been involved in such fights, as well as black witnesses to them, have typically expressed surprise at the white outburst, believing themselves to be still "only talking". One lawyer for the army who was handling a case involving a fight between a white and black soldier at the time, on hearing this report, said that it sounded "just like the testimony given by the black soldier at the trial".

14 To avoid the misrepresentation of intent, blacks need to become conscious of the effect on whites of their more intense levels of interaction, much as the black faculty member in Scene Two did when he said, "You don't need to worry. I'm still talking . . .". Whites, in turn, need to understand that the more intense levels of black speech behavior are

14 (cont.)

partly a consequence of the spiritual force that blacks customarily process and manifest there. They are not of themselves intended to be provocative, or threatening. Moreover, whites also need to become aware of the variable interpretation that might be given in contexts of angry confrontation to otherwise "innocent" movements. Should they need to make a move in such a context they should clarify the intent behind it <u>as they are making it</u>, if they do <u>not</u> wish it to be taken as a sign of aggression.

Blacks themselves do this already, and Richard Pryor, in one of his albums, has a satiric routine in which he is stopped for a traffic violation by a policeman. To offset any possible misinterpretation of his movements—which might give the policeman an excuse to shoot him—Pryor gives the policeman very loud and explicit explanations of each move that he makes (paraphrase): "I am reaching into my right inside pocket for my license. I am only using two fingers, my thumb and my index finger. Please don't shoot me". Of course, blacks also need to understand that a move made within the context of an angry confrontation can still be innocent. Should one occur that is ambiguous, however, blacks can point to its

(Footnotes)

14 (cont.)

potentially aggressive implication and ask for a clarification, or, as in the barroom episode in "The Flying Saucer Song", issue a warning that would indicate how such a move would be or is being interpreted ("Now, listen. Don't you raise that glass, understand?").

15 Black assertiveness and aggressiveness have historically been suppressed for social and political (colonial!) reasons, such that outside of black contexts, blacks were not permitted to be assertive even to the extent that white cultural norms would allow, let alone black ones, that give blacks an even greater latitude in this respect (Harrison 1972, Lewis 1975). Consequently, blacks developed a survival strategy of repressing their enculturated tendencies toward greater assertive and emotionally expressive behavior in contexts involving social risk (Poussaint 1967, Kochman 1976, 1977, Holt 1972b), much as those in subordinate social positions do generally. Blacks call this repression of assertiveness, "fronting". Its philosophy is reflected in the comment by one black woman: "When in the minority, only a fool shows the anger that he feels".

15 (cont.)

However, blacks are also made vulnerable on cultural grounds when they do not "front", since when they assert themselves according to the levels allowed by black cultural norms, whites consider it excessive and provocative and, as shown above, respond accordingly.

16

It is also true with regard to cultural assumptions that more generally underlie legal judgments. For example, blacks have a supra-kinship pattern called "going for brothers (or sisters)" which non-related age-mates frequently adopt. It operates both within the same sex as well as across sex lines and defines a close relationship, like that of a sibling. Oftentimes it is even closer by virtue of the relationship being one voluntarily entered into by the principlas themselves. The "buddy system" in the Army for males is a close analogue in white culture. Because of the absence of a general white cultural reference for the pattern, however, Liebow reports (1966:169ff.) that a charge of premeditated first degree murder was dropped to second-degree murder when it was discovered that Richard and Leroy, who had been "going for brothers" were not actually related. Richard had killed a teenager who the week before had been among those who had badly beaten up Leroy. But this "outraged and bewildered" the dead boy's friends and relatives (p. 170):

16 (cont.)

> "To them, and even to some of Richard and Leroy's friends, it was clearly a premeditated, deliberate killing. Hadn't Richard and Leroy been going for brothers? And hadn't Leroy been badly beaten up by this same boy just eight days earlier?"

17 I am leaving alone the notion that what is considered offensive is universally shared by all groups within American society, since it obviously does not take into account the different experiences of each group or their respective conventions of English language use which shape both their usage patterns and their sensibilities. This would be an extensive study all by itself. Until such time as it is done, the safest and most reasonable position would seem to me to be the one taken by U. S. Supreme Court Justice Harlan in Cohen v. California (403 U. S. 15 (1971), taken from Haiman (1972:15ff.):

> Surely the State has no right to cleanse public debate to the point where it is grammatically palatable

17 (cont.) to the most squeamish among us. Yet no readily ascertainable general principle exists for stopping short of that result were we to affirm the judgment below. For, while the particular four-letter word being litigated here is perhaps more distasteful than most others of its genre, it is nevertheless often true that one man's vulgarity is another's lyric.

18 Justice Powell in Lewis v. City of New Orleans (40 U. S. Law Week 3614, taken from Haiman, p. 25) allowed for cultural variation only with regard to the police:

> If these words had been addressed by one citizen to another face to face and in a hostile manner, I would have no doubt that they would be "fighting words". But the situation may be different where such words are addressed to a police officer <u>trained to exercise a higher degree of restraint</u> than the average citizen (emphasis added).

Yet, just as police are trained to "exercise a higher degree of restraint", so cultures other than that of the dominant white that guides interpretation in this area, like that of blacks, might enculturate its members to similar effect.

19 Lawyers and anthropologists may be at odds over what constitutes "expert" testimony here. For example, Swett (1966; taken from Labov 1972:342) reported the following episode from a trial involving the shooting of Chicago Eddie by Young Beartracks outside a poolroom in East Palo Alto:

> The first witness for the prosecution, the poolroom attendant and a member of the urban gang, did state in cross-examination that "Eddie put him [Young Beartracks] in the dozens", but the effort of the defense counsel to procure a clarification of the term dozens was objected to by the prosecution on the grounds that the witness had not been qualified as an expert in semantics.

20 In labeling the patterns described above as "black" and "white", I have presumed a cultural homogeneity among the black and white racial populations. However, I recognize that variations in age, sex, socioeconomic status, region, etc., are likely to make the patterns more representative of some blacks and whites than of others, and that to the extent that cultural transfer between blacks and whites has occurred in American society, what is characterized here as "white" may also be true of some blacks, and vice-versa.

20 (cont.) Nonetheless, I defend the use of the terms <u>black</u> and <u>white</u> on the grounds that racial segregation in American society has caused race and culture to have a high correlation. Furthermore, the cultural patterns represented here as <u>black</u> and <u>white</u> were respectively drawn from entirely black and white racial populations. Until a study is done that would show the distribution of these patterns along a socially representative group of blacks and whites therefore, the implication of cultural homogeneity remains. What I can do to reduce the possibility of a misrepresentation however, is to indicate whom I think the labels <u>best</u> describe, based upon who provided the information for this report, even as some blacks and whites will think the groups too broad, and others too narrow. For blacks, that would be primarily "community" or "grassroots" people. For whites, it would be members of the dominant or majority culture: those sometimes also referred to as "middle-class".

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